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FILM BASED PHOTOGRAPHIC MATERIALS PROJECT: A STORY OF PERSEVERANCE AND PATIENCE

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Abstract: Over twelve years ago a collection of cellulose nitrate negatives at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum spontaneously disintegrated. Medals housed in the same drawer were damaged. Furthermore, uncoated parts of the flat file frame were corroded and an entire five drawer unit had to be replaced. This incident was used by Conservation to illustrate the immediate need to address the vintage still picture negatives found in the various collections. A proposed project to identify, house and duplicate the negatives was not given funding. The proposal was periodically modified and funding needs updated; it was finally approved and funding made available for fiscal year 2010, renewable in 2011. The final proposal to address the needs of the film-based materials in the collections included two highly important components that were not in the original version. The first was a physical survey of the collections in order to find the materials. The second was a proposal to digitize the negatives. The evolution of the project, address the amount of time it took for approval and funding, and the challenges of finding, housing, and preserving the diverse formats are reviewed.

This paper is not only concerned with a project to survey and rehouse still picture negatives from the Holocaust era, but also highlights the unintended consequences of institutional decisions made long before the project was conceived. How those decisions influenced the ability to produce an effective project design and the need to incorporate unforeseen revisions will also be discussed.

Since the opening of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in 1993, institutional strategic plans have repeatedly outlined strong acquisitions programs. The underlying logic of this approach was twofold. First, Holocaust survivors were aging and therefore the opportunity to acquire their collections and firsthand stories would quickly disappear. Secondly, once the collections were secured, then the institution could attend to their conservation needs at some later date, as time and resources became available. A direct result of the USHMM strategic planning initiatives has been a relatively high rate of collections acquisitions, from the peak of fifty collections per month in the early 1990's to roughly thirty per month today. This puts pressure on resources to focus on the immediate need to provide basic housing and cataloguing of incoming collections.

There is, of course, an obvious weakness in this approach. Collecting carries with it the responsibility for care, especially for the more sensitive materials such as film-based photographic images. However, the budget for conservation relative to the size of the rapidly growing collections was small, receiving only a seven per cent increase over a fifteen year period. The often repeated justification for the small conservation budget was that the window of opportunity with the rapidly aging survivor community was closing, and so funding for

acquisitions was a more critical need. But then, in 1998, a collection of cellulose nitrate negatives disintegrated, possibly due to a spike in humidity in the area where they were stored.

It is unclear going over the various memos and reports on the incident, just how many images were damaged beyond repair, nor what proportion of the collection was moving images rather than still picture negatives. The only details on the collection are that it included 287 cut strips of three images each, as well as a small number of images of sheet film. All of the negatives had been housed in plastic sleeves which created the perfect setting for a build-up of decomposition products. One memo states that only a few of images were still viable but most of the film had quickly degraded to the powdery stage. Subsequently, the USHMM made the decision to deaccession the films and have them destroyed. Unfortunately, the collection had been neither reformatted nor fully catalogued, so the images of Dachau and Ebensee concentration camps at the moment of liberation were truly lost.

There was also some collateral damage, as the collection had been housed in a flat file. Several metal objects housed in the same drawer corroded due to exposure to the by-products of the cellulose nitrate decomposition. Furthermore, uncoated parts of the flat file frame were corroded. The damage extended to the drawers above and below the one housing the collection; and so, the entire five drawer unit had to be replaced.

But the incident provided an avenue to bring the conservation needs of the collections in general, and the film-based items in particular, to the forefront. Meetings were held to discuss the immediate need to address the vintage still negatives found in the various collections. A project was proposed to identify, properly house, and duplicate the negatives, but it did not receive funding or program approval. Revisions of the proposal that reflected advances in the field as well as increasing costs continued to be submitted on a regular basis over the following twelve years.

Whenever it seemed that progress was being made, the USHMM would undergo a reorganization with key staff leaving and new directors appointed. This meant periodically stepping back and educating staff in mid and upper level management about the conservation concerns for the laboratory treatment and long-term preservation of the collections in general, and the film-based materials in particular.

In 2007 the proposal to address the needs of film-based still pictures in the collections finally garnered some interest. It included two highly important components that were not in the earliest versions. One was to plan for digitization of the images and the second was the inclusion of a collections wide survey to find them, due to the fact that the cataloguing system for the collections did not permit a viable search based on object type or media. In fact, the USHMM has a rather checkered history with online cataloguing systems. When the Museum first opened, The Museum System, known as TMS, was used. TMS was replaced in 1998 with ReDiscovery. Just two years later, the decision was made to transfer to Voyager, which is a system produced for and used by libraries. It works well for information regarding title, author, and publisher, but is not made to handle information that is useful for a curator, conservator, or archivist. Information was squeezed into fields that were never intended to be descriptive and vocabulary describing published materials had to be used in rather creative ways to describe other types of

collection materials. As a result, other than usual problems with the transfer of data from one system to another, such as compatibility issues, data clean-up, and data loss or recovery, critical information was simply left out.

To further complicate matters, there was no agreement among staff as to what to call things. So, even though several valiant efforts were made to find the photographic materials through the active database, with a lack of controlled vocabulary the resultant reports were incomplete to incomprehensible, and therefore, unusable. Multiple searches were made using different key words or a combination of key words in both the singular and plural forms, using terms such as negative(s), photographic negative(s), photo negative(s), still picture(s), still picture negative(s), film(s), etc. Results from the searches were collated and compared, but confidence in the accuracy of the results quickly became inversely proportional to the number of attempts at locating the materials through the collections database. Without the ability to search by object type, format, or media, there was no reliable method of ascertaining the number of film-based items in the collections, nor where they could be found. A complete physical survey, therefore, had to be conducted to locate and identify the materials; and, a cost estimate for digitization had to be placed on hold. In early 2010, funding was made available from the Executive Director's Reserve fund to conduct the survey and transfer the materials to more appropriate housing. The funding supports a Conservation Fellow, Conservation Interns, and a contract Registrar, as well as materials for rehousing and equipment such as laboratory low temperature refrigerators for cold storage.

An initial survey spreadsheet was created based on the useful information gleaned from the more successful data searches. Notification was then sent out to curators, archivists and registrars that a conservation team would be going through the collections seeking film-based still picture negatives. Included in the notification was a reminder, heretofore ignored, to notify the Conservation Branch should any new collections come in containing these types of materials. The response was immediate. The Film and Video curators asked that the moving image materials be included in the survey in order to have a full assessment of their condition and need for cold storage. The Director of Curatorial Affairs asked that we include all photographic materials that are not printed on paper. So, while the project began with a very narrow focus, it now addresses the needs of different types of photographic materials such as images on glass as well as the film-based still picture negatives.

The survey was begun by literally starting at the top left corner of the first range in the first row of the shelving units. Notations were made directly on the networked survey form so any member of the team was able to easily find where the survey left off. At this point all the roughly 2,000 shelves have been surveyed and a survey of twelve cabinets as well as the moving image materials will be complete by the time of publication, though rehousing for cold storage may be ongoing.

As the off-site collections storage has outgrown its current space, the USHMM is in the process of planning for a new purpose-built facility. The feasibility study was completed in March 2011, and the proposal is making its way through the Congressional committees for approval. With the anticipated move of the collections to a new building within seven to ten years, the decision was made not to invest in the infrastructure for low-temperature storage at the current site.

Furthermore, as the number of collection items needing low-temperature storage was unknown, it was not possible to effectively design such a vault. Thus, a modular system of cold storage units was adopted. This consists of 34 cubic foot capacity, low temperature laboratory refrigerators. An initial four units were purchased; additional units will be purchased on an as needed basis. The set points for the units are $4^{\circ}\text{C} \pm 1^{\circ}$ and $35\% \text{RH} \pm 3\%$. The unit designated for glass-based materials is set at $6^{\circ}\text{C} \pm 1^{\circ}$ and $40\% \text{RH} \pm 3\%$. Acclimatization back to ambient will be accomplished as needed through the use of a picnic cooler. A hygrometer will be mounted on the outside of the cooler and its probe mounted inside in order to monitor the acclimatization process.

Rehousing of the materials has followed standard conservation protocols. Custom housings are constructed as needed, particularly for the more deteriorated items. The size of the outer boxes has been determined by the width, depth, and height of the shelves in the cold storage units. The system is based on eight boxes per shelf as the smallest size. If there is a need for a larger outer box, the overall dimensions are kept to the same proportions so that a combination of box sizes can easily fit into a unit with no wasted space. Archival solid cores used for moving images have been very useful for housing long strips of film-based negatives, both uncut or lengths cut longer than will fit in an archival film sleeve. Many of the negatives have been stored wrapped around each other or rolled and put into a small container, and will no longer lay flat. All but the highly degraded negatives that fall into this category are placed on an archival solid core. These fit quite well in archival microfilm boxes and are then placed in one of the standard sized archival boxes. In all cases, empty areas in the outer boxes are padded using archival materials so the contents will not shift during handling. The outer boxes are wrapped using the standard protocols for cold storage.

The rehousing phase of the project has been conducted in close association with the contract registrar in order to insure a complete tracking system. A pull sheet is filled out for each collection containing photographic materials that are being placed in cold storage. The pull sheet contains a description of the items separated from the rest of the collection, how many items were pulled, and the new location. Copies of the pull sheet are placed both with the collection and in the permanent file. Notations are made in the online catalogue database as well. The registrar has also developed a template for box labels which clearly identify the contents. This is crucial as many of the items had not heretofore been identified a component of a collection. The registrar is also compiling a master list of the photographic materials going into cold storage with their box number and location by unit and shelf. The inventory will be available online; hard copies will also be given to the Curator of Photographs.

The vast majority of the images have neither been printed nor scanned. This is not surprising as before the survey was completed, the curators and archivists at the USHMM, when polled, estimated the number of photographic images in the collections to be no more than roughly three to four thousand. The survey spreadsheet lists over fifty thousand images in the collections. Once the materials are safely housed, collections of high interest will be flagged by the curators and a schedule developed to pull them from cold storage for review with a conservator. Funds have been secured for a pilot project to treat and digitize some of the images. This will enable the development of a more detailed longer term project to make these images available for research and exhibition.

While the focus of this paper is not the specific collections themselves, it is worthwhile to note the variety of photographic formats. The majority of negative images are on 35mm film with the next largest group being on 120mm stock, but 16mm and 8mm are also present as well as transparencies often in various non-standard sizes. Black and white and color slides are also in the collections. Glass-based photographic materials, negatives, slides and stereo-slides, form a large part of the image collections. And as the condition of the materials vary from excellent to highly deteriorated, standardizing the housing of the images for placement in the cold storage units has become a challenge.

In conclusion, the following lessons were learned both during the period of developing the project and its implementation:

1. Repetition is good. Someone eventually will hear and understand what you have to say.
2. Speaking with colleagues is invaluable. It helps keep one's sanity to hear about their setbacks and successes and to learn from them. This project would not be successful in its design or implementation without their input.
3. Forging relationships is key, among all levels and all specialties of staff. Even if the desired information or agreement is not immediately forthcoming, colleagues will remember how to find you. They will eventually return with the answer to what was asked or even return with new and equally useful information.
4. Activity breeds response. Once colleagues see movement on this project, information that had been sought and repeatedly requested will be suddenly made readily available.
5. The system has holes. Procedures need to be reviewed and updated, and staff held accountable for following them. Several times during the survey collection items were not where they were supposed to be and the paperwork documenting the removal and new location had not been completed. A few times, the paperwork had been filled out, but the new location was creatively named and, therefore, not clear.
6. And, above all, however simple a project sounds and however long it is supposed to take, it will be more complex and take much longer. Patience and flexibility are valuable assets in shepherding the project through creation to implementation.

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